

# Recording Solo: Managing Long-Distance Data Collection within Audio Diary Research with Healthcare Professionals

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the methodological and reflexive implications of using audio diaries in remote qualitative research with healthcare professionals. Drawing on a three-month study involving 18 participants who submitted audio recordings weekly, complemented by follow-up interviews, the article examines how this method enables the collection of rich, emotionally nuanced, and temporally proximate narratives. The audio diary format proved particularly effective for engaging professionals under high emotional and organizational pressure, offering a flexible and participant-led space for reflection. The study also sheds light on the challenges of sustaining participation over time, the importance of ethical responsiveness, and the role of the researcher in supporting engagement at a distance. Ultimately, the paper proposes the concept of long-distance reflexivity to describe how both participants and researchers negotiate meaning, presence, and vulnerability in fully remote research settings.

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## Introduction: Remote Diaries within Social Research

Researchers in various disciplines, from psychology to anthropology, have often used diaries for data collection by asking participants to record personal content in the form of narratives (Sorokin and Berger 1939; Harvey 2011; Crozier and Cassel 2016). Diary research in the social sciences commonly takes the form of solicited diaries, which the researcher requests from participants to examine particular research questions in depth and elicit the protagonists' experiences through daily accounts of events, impressions, and emotions.

Solicited diaries can be used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, as an independent survey instrument, or to supplement other data collection techniques (Denzin 1970). Bryman (2001) outlines three main ways in which diaries have been used in social research: (a) as a researcher-driven method of data collection; (b) as an autobiographical historical record written spontaneously by the subject (mainly used by social historians); and (c) as a record of the researcher's activities similar to field notes written by ethnographers. The autonomy left to the subjects in the composition of content also depends to a large extent on the project's cog-

nitive needs. Therefore, diaries have proven over time to be a versatile tool that can adapt to different disciplinary contexts and populations (Bartlett and Milligan 2015; Hyers 2018).

Diaries also help researchers understand the relationship between the subject and the surrounding physical and social environments, taking into account emotions, everyday practices, and participants' interactions with other people. It is also possible to examine participants and their experiences in real time in a longitudinal form that monitors change over time across a range of experiences (Moretti 2021).

Furthermore, many studies have demonstrated diaries' potential in rural contexts (O'Reilly et al. 2022), geographical sciences (Milligan 2005), within healthcare (Monrouxe 2009; Bernays et al. 2019), and with young people (Worth 2009).

In diary research design, as well as with many qualitative techniques, participant-researcher contact is activated and maintained through in-person meetings that normally help build a solid relationship between the two parties to establish trust and openness, while remaining connected during the study.

However, in some circumstances, encounters may not occur, and relationships may remain remote. The development of the diary in audio form is the result of a very recent journey and represents to date a field of literature that is still little explored: the earliest evidence of the use of audio diaries comes in 2008 with the studies of Monrouxe (2009) for the medical field, Milligan (2005) in the geographical sciences, and Hislop and colleagues (2005) in the social sciences. Researchers have repeatedly pointed out that the audio diary can be a comprehensive and exhaustive gateway to a participant's personal information that otherwise would not be recorded. In particular, capturing events in real time, analyzing changes, and participants' daily challenges enables the construction of a detailed dynamic film of the respondent's emotions and feelings (Monrouxe 2009). Additionally, the recent COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible for many qualitative researchers to continue in-person research, thereby necessitating remote data collection.

This was the case for Seide and colleagues (2023), who investigated the subjective experience of minority stress among Latinas situated at the nexus of sexuality, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic marginality. Initially, the researchers who engaged in the field had planned to travel to San Antonio in person and use the life history method. However, because of COVID, the researchers worked remotely and adapted the study to an online format using a flexible diaristic interview method.

Similarly, Mueller and colleagues (2023) captured extensive data from marginalized groups remotely during a disaster, namely, 100 young diarists in Indonesia and Nepal with specific labor market vulnerabilities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors demonstrated, through their *Disaster Diary*, that the remote diary method offers particular advantages for qualitative research in crisis scenarios.

The use of remote diaries also facilitated access to several groups of diarists in geographically dispersed locations over extended periods (Almeida 2005; Rudrum et al. 2022) without sacrificing rich narratives of people's unique and complicated experiences (Johnson and Bytheway 2001; de Lanerolle, Schoon, and Walton 2020).

Given the numerous challenges and limitations of working with distance diary entries, remote diaries offered rich opportunities for qualitative field research while maintaining public health protocols. As Bernays, Rhodes, and Jankovic Terzic (2014) demonstrated, audio diaries can be qualitatively different in tone from interviews, and more openness was found in diaries compared to final interviews. It has been argued that subjects may have been more comfortable while recording on their own during the time available to them rather than during online interviews.

In addition to these methodological functions, diaries inherently invite reflexivity, both as a research goal and as an epistemological condition of qualitative inquiry. Reflexivity involves examining your judgments, practices, and belief systems during the data collection process. The goal of being reflexive is to identify any personal beliefs that may have affected the research (Woolgar 1988; Ashmore 1989; Lynch 2000).

Within diary research, this reflexive potential is amplified, as participants are asked not only to report on events but also to make sense of them through introspection, self-narration, and selective emphasis. The act of writing or recording a diary entry becomes a performative moment of reflection, in which experiences are not merely documented but interpreted in real time. This makes diaries powerful tools for capturing evolving subjectivi-

ties, shifting emotional states, and nuanced moral or professional tensions that might otherwise remain unspoken. For the researcher, engaging with diary materials also demands a reflexive stance, as the data are deeply personal and mediated by the participants' narrative choices, requiring ongoing sensitivity, positional awareness, and ethical responsiveness during both collection and analysis.

With this article, I aim to contribute to this body of work by detailing the use of diaries in a long-distance context within public health through healthcare professionals, with particular attention to the ethical, methodological, and reflexive dimensions that this approach entails. Analysis of diary entries, participant selection, trust relationships, and constant feedback requires a different design when the researcher has no real contact with participants in the field (Moretti 2021). Specifically, the communication process, mediated only by online interaction, proves effective in working with some specific participants in unique situations (e.g., with healthcare professionals in the pandemic context), but simultaneously generates questions related to reflexivity that need to be considered.

Therefore, in this paper, I first explain: 1) how to conduct a research study remotely, detailing each stage of the research, and 2) the profound ethical and reflexive implications of such remote research for both participants and the researcher.

## Methodological Implications: Notes from Online Fieldwork

### Research Questions

This study aimed to understand how to manage and perceive long-distance data collection

through diaries from both participant and researcher perspectives. The use of audio diaries, in particular, enabled access to participants' reflections in close temporal proximity to lived experiences, allowing for the emergence of spontaneous and emotionally rich narratives. Unlike retrospective interviews, this method captured the immediacy of everyday tensions, ethical concerns, and relational dynamics that might have otherwise remained unspoken or rationalized after the fact. Therefore, the following questions were addressed in this research:

- How did participants experience full autonomy in data generation? What strengths and weaknesses of this method did they report?
- How can long-distance research help elicit narratives? What barriers (theoretical and methodological) might researchers encounter with this constant distance?
- What type of impact can remote data collection make within the relationship between researchers and participants?

### Selection

This study was conducted entirely remotely (online) and is part of a larger independent research project launched in November 2020 that aimed to assess healthcare professionals' emotional labor and their relationship management with patients and informal caregivers. In-person meetings were not possible due to the pandemic context in which the study was conceived and conducted. Moreover, participants were geographically dispersed and professionally engaged in highly

demanding clinical roles, which further limited opportunities for physical encounters.

Specifically, to answer my research questions, and because this is an exploratory study, nonprobabilistic sampling, or grab sampling, was used to select participants through an online training program that a university in northern Italy offered. The program was selected for three reasons: a) its participants comprised healthcare professionals with varying geographic and sociodemographic characteristics (i.e., job title, gender, age, or ethnicity); b) it operated entirely online (in line with the research design), and c) it was aimed at training professionals by promoting social skills.

I initially reached out to the training program's organizing committee and made preliminary contact with the key tutors, who played a central gatekeeping role. After accepting the proposal, the organizers established a bridge between the researcher and the learners. Potential participants were introduced to the research generically in two online classes, after which I left my contact information for those interested.

To be eligible, along with providing informed consent to participate, individuals had to be employed at a healthcare organization, on the job at the time of the study, working closely with patients, and familiar with digital platforms.

Of all the course participants (about 40), 18 agreed to participate in the study (see Table 1 for participants' details). Participation was on a voluntary basis and without remuneration.

After communicating their willingness to join the study, the participants were scheduled for individual interviews through the online Teams platform to begin the training process.

**Table 1. Participants' demographics**

Interviewee Code	Gender	Job Title
01	M	Physiotherapist
02	F	Nurse
03	F	Nurse
04	F	Nurse
05	F	Physiotherapist
06	F	Nurse
07	M	Nurse
08	F	Physiotherapist
09	M	Physiotherapist
10	M	Psychotherapist
11	F	Physiotherapist
12	F	Psychotherapist
13	F	Psychotherapist
14	F	Nurse
15	F	Physiotherapist
16	M	Physiotherapist
17	F	Nurse
18	F	Nurse

*Source: Self-elaboration.*

## Training

During the first individual interview, conducted in September 2022, the research rationale was explained, and instructions were given on how to make audio diary entries. The individual interviews were crucial because during the previous meeting, not all participants understood the study's purpose. Each participant was asked to register at least one audio per week over three months. This timeline was established for two reasons. First, consideration was given to participants' work schedules and the still-stretched rhythms and shift systems required in the healthcare profession. Second, it was preferable to keep audio diary production time-diluted

but constant, to evaluate the impacts of the long distance between the actors involved in the research. Finally, efforts were made to avoid fatigue in subjects already proven by heavier workloads/schedules during the pandemic as much as possible (Watson and Lupton 2022). The timeline was discussed with participants during the individual interviews, and all respondents accepted it. Data collection occurred from October 2022 to January 2023.

Before they began to submit audio diaries, the participants were instructed on how to conduct *solo* recordings.

First, as the researcher was unable to meet the subjects face-to-face in advance to provide them with formal equipment, the participants were asked to create recordings with their devices. They could use the “voice memo” function on their smartphones, other messenger platforms, or even a professional microphone. Most chose the memo option, and in only one case was a specialized tool used.

Second, considering the participants’ significant workloads in their field, they were free to submit their audios daily, weekly, or at the end of the period under investigation.

Third, no minimum recording length was agreed upon, leaving the subject completely free to choose their diaries’ duration, thereby developing a free narrative of self (Fitt 2018). The audio diaries’ durations varied widely, ranging from a minimum of 60 seconds to a maximum of 17 minutes, reflecting the participants’ freedom and willingness to share as much or as little as they saw fit. In total, each of the 18 participants submitted approximately 12 diary entries—one per week over three months—resulting in a corpus of 216 recordings. All participants adhered to the proposed rhythm, and the data collected proved rich in detail, tone, and emotional nuance.

Fourth, a thematic list of diary prompts (see Table 2) was assigned to each participant to aid in storytelling. All assigned prompts were asked to be tapped each time the diary was being recorded, while still leaving the subject free to add their ideas, considerations, themes, and experiences. Thus, an effort was made to respect the participants’ subjectivity as much as possible (Mueller et al. 2023). The list of diary prompts was developed based on existing literature on diary-based methods and prior research on healthcare professionals’ emotional experiences, work environments, and relational dynamics (e.g., Monrouxe 2009; Bartlett and Milligan 2015; Bernays et al. 2019).

**Table 2. Diary prompts**

Feelings	Spaces and places	Relationship
During your day, how do you feel?	What are the areas that most affect your work?	How do you evaluate your relationships with colleagues?
What are the obstacles you encounter daily?	How are they distributed?	Are there any times of conflict?
How do you feel about your work?	What are the spaces you have visited most today? Which ones have you avoided?	How do you interact with roles other than your own?

Source: *Self-elaboration*.



In addition to recording audio diary entries, I asked the participants to take part in a final online interview, and all 18 subjects agreed to participate.

The participants were provided with sufficient information to make informed decisions about participation, and completion of the interview was viewed as consent to participate. Due to the persistent distance, and in addition to routine ethical procedures used in research, other research-related issues were brought to the participants' attention. Since we never could meet physically, the subjects were informed that if they stopped sending audios, it would be viewed as equivalent to not wanting to continue in the study. In this sense, the subjects could be free to choose how much to share. Furthermore, it was agreed that the researcher would not process the data collected for publication until the study ended. Likewise, during the final interview, subjects were free to decide whether to authorize the researcher to process all collected material (audio diaries and final interview data) or only a portion of it. Additionally, while I was collecting data, I followed a privacy-by-design approach, in which no sensitive data left the device (or side) of the participant. All other transferred data required user consent and were fully anonymized.

To handle distance most effectively, the researcher can provide unobtrusive assistance to the diarist by supplying small, weekly, supportive online inputs while still paying attention and not influencing the diarist. These gentle reminders can help participants recognize their efforts (i.e., those most engaged) or support others in case of a loss of motivation. In this case, weekly messages (via email) were sent to help participants generate content. Messages included brief encouragement, inquiries about any potential difficulties they might have encountered, and a re-

minder that the researcher was always available for clarification or support. This approach aimed to balance autonomy with care, ensuring participants felt accompanied throughout the process without exerting pressure or influencing the content of their entries.

### **The Final Interview's Value**

In addition to audio diaries, I conducted a final follow-up interview with each participant, during which probing questions were asked to uncover specific details needed to complete the narrative. Furthermore, it is the only occasion during which it is possible to obtain feedback from the participant about their experiences taking part in the study in real time and validate my impressions with them. With the research conducted entirely remotely and alone, participants played a central role because they were able to corroborate what emerged and what the solo researcher could analyze. In essence, the participants took part in data triangulation that enabled capturing salient and targeted aspects that have remained excluded from autonomous content production in a *process of crystallization* (Denzin and Lincoln 1994).

The interviews were conducted 10 days after the recording period had ended (end of January 2023), giving the subjects time to process their lived experience. Similarly, the researcher had some breathing room to reframe the content that emerged and process the diaries sent later. The final interview makes it possible to guide initial work and investigate the diary recordings' "behind the scenes" aspects (Bartlett 2012).

During the interviews, the following themes (Table 3) were deepened:

**Table 3. Final interview**

Final interview themes
The personal experience of recording audio diaries
Challenging moments
Possible advantages/limits of being distant/remote from the researcher
How the autonomous production of the data was handled
Ethical considerations

Source: Self-elaboration.

The opportunity to express oneself during a final interview can also be useful in assessing the participants' level of openness about the research.

### Diary Analysis

As a prelude to the results section, outlining differences (in timing and analysis) between the two types of data collected—audio diaries (first phase) and interviews (second phase)—is critical.

Audio diaries were transcribed *verbatim* every time they were sent to me, allowing for a process of constant comparison (Charmaz 2003) using a grounded theory approach. I also dealt with the participants' voices, so I wrote several memos to save my ideas, insights, interpretations, and growing understanding of the collected data. Furthermore, unlike interviews, which usually capture people in a single moment, in a diary study, participants self-report data longitudinally. For this reason, taking notes about the language used, content, and voice intonation at a particular point during a con-

versation was fundamental to keeping track of the participant's evolution. In another way, because of this longitudinal component and the large amount of qualitative data produced by the participants, I needed to re-evaluate the research objective that I targeted throughout the study. Simultaneously, due to this long-distance relationship, I kept notes about my feelings and how I was dealing with this remote data collection.

To systematize the diary analysis process, I developed a *long-distance evaluation matrix* to highlight the participants' longitudinal dimension by examining three interactions: topic, researcher, and technique (see Table 4).

Specifically, the topic "interaction" was evaluated following an open coding process (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in which an initial open category system was outlined with maximum flexibility. This coding's purpose was to fragment the data to derive properties, creating a taxonomy of concepts and categories.

In particular, the relationships with the researcher and technique were discussed during the final interview. Having been unable to meet any subjects in person, I needed final validation about what emerged from the analysis. Therefore, the participants gave me their reflections on my interpretations.

As for the final interviews, they were also transcribed *verbatim* with NVivo 12 software used for the analysis, in which I created codes iteratively rather than attempting to fit the data into preconceived standardized codes. The categories that emerged from my analysis are discussed in the next section.



**Table 4. Long-distance evaluation matrix**

Topic	Researcher	Technique
<p><b>It concerns how participants interact with proposed topics.</b></p> <p>Questions leading my analysis:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the topics covered?</li> <li>• Are there recurring themes, or does each audio tell a different story?</li> <li>• Compared with the track provided, have all the themes been touched upon? What was left out?</li> <li>• What kind of reflections emerged?</li> <li>• Does the narration follow a chronological order?</li> </ul>	<p><b>It refers to the relationship between participants and the researcher.</b></p> <p>Questions leading my analysis:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does the interaction with the researcher turn out?</li> <li>• How intimate does the conversation appear?</li> <li>• What tone does the narrator use to address the researcher (e.g., intimate, formal, informal, etc.)?</li> <li>• How does the researcher convey the conversation?</li> <li>• What emotions did the narrator bring into their recordings? How do they convey them (e.g., what expressions, terms, etc.)?</li> </ul>	<p><b>It embraces all interactions with the audio diary technique.</b></p> <p>Questions leading my analysis:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did the narrative unfold?</li> <li>• How many days did it take?</li> <li>• Did any difficulties emerge while using audio diaries?</li> <li>• What are the advantages of this type of narration?</li> <li>• How does the narrator's mood seem (elements of tension, hesitation, etc.)?</li> <li>• Did the protagonist seem comfortable?</li> <li>• Why do I think the narrator chose these episodes/stories?</li> </ul>

Source: *Self-elaboration.*

Transcripts of both interviews and diaries were made in the original language (Italian), then translated into English, with special attention paid to not altering the participants' narration.

### Findings: *Verba Manent*

In this section, I present the findings from both the transcribed audio diaries and interviews. From my analysis, and thanks to the evaluation matrix that highlighted the participants' longitudinal dimension, I identified two folk categories generated by the remote interactions: *trust* and *research fatigue*. The following categories demonstrate the complex relationship between researcher and diarist, and

the difficulties of long-distance management of research involving audio diaries.

### Staying Distant: A Matter of Trust

The first category that emerged during the analysis relates to the relationship created between the researcher and participant, involving the emotional and cognitive bonds formed. Different modes of "distance interaction" between the diarist and researcher emerged from the data analysis. First, the diary format allows the research to proceed, as far as possible, in the absence of the researcher, rather than having participants simply respond to questions or prompts:

Hi. It took me a while to decide to record. It's a new thing that scared me, but most of all, I was scared that I didn't really understand the mandate and that I was going off topic. However, after your email reminder, I made up my mind, and now I am recording. I went back and read the emails [and] re-read the instructions. [Diarist 15, audio number 1]

Good evening, [my name]. I wanted to send you the audio message that you asked us for... Even though I have to admit that it's not exactly easy to rearrange the ideas. Let's just say that I made a little effort because you asked us for it [laughing]. [Diarist 16, audio number 2]

With diaries, participants can have more autonomy to share what they want, as well as where and when:

Yesterday was a very unusual day... I was going to tell you about work, but then I got into a fight with my mother-in-law, who lives in the apartment above ours. I already came back from work exhausted, and then I also had to get into a fight at night. So, there you go... I haven't been able to record anything for you, and even now, I'm still not in the mood. [Diarist 11, audio number 3]

This often happens to the same person, particularly if the diaries are recorded a short distance from each other:

Hi, [my name]. I'll just finish telling you yesterday's story with my mother-in-law... Then I promise that from tomorrow [on], I'll focus on work. [It's] just that I am really nervous since yesterday... [Diarist 11, audio number 4]

As much as a diarist may feel comfortable making light of the themes recorded, the request to make

these reflections explicit is always artificial and often demanding. Reflecting on some things because it is required is actually not a natural process for most people, and even if participants are asked to relate their thoughts to their everyday experiences, there will necessarily be moments of alienation and difficulty:

[my name], I'm xxx, and I'm sending you my first message even though I was supposed to start a week ago. I've had basically a chaotic week... [Diarist 9, audio number 1]

Hi, [my name]. I wanted to share with you today's itinerary because that's what you asked us to do... I'm trying to reflect on my feelings, but honestly, I'm really overwhelmed. And what can I tell you? I've been doing some crazy shifts. [Diarist 12, audio number 9]

The diarist has the freedom to decide on the timing and content of the flow of information they choose to express. This is likely to lead to a more spontaneous and less-directed relationship:

No work today. I am actually also hung over [laughing a lot] because I went drinking with my colleagues yesterday, and maybe we had too much wine. But I knew I wasn't going to work today... [Diarist 17, audio number 6]

Hi, [my name]. I'm on my way to work... I mean, actually, I'm already in the parking lot because this hospital parking lot is crazy, in my opinion. I start working at 8 a.m., [so] I have to leave home at 6:40 a.m. And you will ask, "But do you live far away?" NOOOOO! I live 13 kilometers away, but this parking here is wild, so if you want to park, you have to arrive early. [Diarist 15, audio number 7]

Today, I was finally home, so I enjoyed my family a little bit. We went to eat at my parents' [home] with my husband, and I think that these moments are precious. His parents, on the other hand, are sometimes a bit intrusive... For goodness' sake, I love them. However, I feel like they treat me a bit too childishly... [Diarist 4, audio number 5]

At the end of this period, I realized that I often told you more about my personal life than about my work, as you had asked me to... Soooooooooooooorry! [Diarist 17, audio number 12]

Beyond the challenges of overcoming the power dynamic that pervades any interaction situation between the diarist and researcher, a less-detectable aspect of diary analysis also exists, in which responses appear to be entirely spontaneous. Diaries recorded from a distance are structured inevitably. In all the narratives produced, having been prompted by the researcher, the scientific expectation underlying the narrative itself remains very evident. Data produced away from the researcher are not meant to remove such constraints, but rather to access subtle nuances generated by the constant production of content over an extended period. In this way, although a diarist's position on a particular issue may not be overturned explicitly, it is possible to follow the complex and sometimes conflicting ways in which opinions are formed and challenged.

### **Relationship with the Technique: Research Fatigue**

The second dimension concerns the diarist's relationship with the technique and data production. One aspect that emerged from the diaries is what has been termed *research fatigue*, that is, participants' psychological and emotional exhaustion—more

specifically, the feeling of extreme fatigue generated from data production and the audio diary method repetitiveness:

I wish I could tell you something good about my work, but I can't. Today, especially, I can't see anything good, also because it seems to me that I tell you the same thing every day. [Diarist 01, audio number 8]

Sorry, I haven't sent you more audio, but I am a little tired these days. I have a thousand commitments, and [I'm not in the] mood to send you audio about my work. [Diarist 16, audio number 3]

Although diaries leave room for autonomy and freedom for participants, allowing them to reveal what they want and at the best time, the technique requires time and dedication from participants:

So, I anticipate that I forgot the third audio from last week, but I don't have too much time in this period. [Diarist 09, audio number 3]

Sorry, [my name], I am having a hard time keeping this diary going partly because of time and partly because when I get off work, I really don't want to talk about work! [Diarist 18, audio number 6]

This is particularly evident during the final interview, which is designed to provide context for the diaries and control for artificiality and performance:

I must admit it: [Taking part in this research] was more tiring than expected... By the end, I had lost my patience a little bit because I didn't feel like recording anymore... I knew that I had to go ahead because by now, I had made a commitment. [final interview with Diarist 15]

By now, I had made a commitment to you. If I had known, I would not have accepted [laughs]. [final interview with Diarist 09]

However, for other diarists, the opportunity to communicate through a diary was viewed in a positive way:

There were some moments that were easier than others... Let's say it was like talking to a friend on the phone and telling her things that I didn't feel like sharing with my family. [final interview with Diarist 10]

One possible cause of this data irritation may also relate to the type of group involved with the research, that is, groups that are particularly susceptible to research projects may demonstrate reluctance and fatigue as far as continuing their efforts to answer scientific questions. In this case, research fatigue can be said to occur when individuals and groups become tired of engaging in research and can be identified through a demonstration of reluctance to continue to engage. It is undeniable that COVID has elicited fatigue among health professionals who have been the subject of numerous studies. Various professionals have been asked to express their opinions, feelings, experiences, and expectations throughout the pandemic and in different roles—as experts, victims, frontline workers, ordinary citizens, et cetera. In practice, research fatigue and commitment increase when one feels “over-studied.”

Let us take three separate diaries from the same person as an example:

It may be because with COVID, the shifts at work have doubled, or because there is a general weariness among me and my colleagues to talk about COVID and our work... [Diarist 3, audio number 2]

Then, today, I was reflecting on the fact that at the end of November, there is going to be the national health professions conference... which I decided not to attend, however, because they are talking about COVID and more about post-COVID. So, the topic is still that... [Diarist 3, audio number 6]

Hi, [my name]. Let's just say that on evenings like these, I get hope that we can see some light at the end of the tunnel. [Diarist 3, audio number 9]

Diary research tends to entail collecting data over a longer period than many other qualitative methods, which is valuable for studying changes in health professionals' well-being. Using diaries to follow individuals' narratives over time, rather than considering individual data, offers distinctive insights because attitudes and experiences can be cross-referenced across entries, such as to determine whether hopes for the future were well-placed.

## Discussion: Long-Distance Reflexivity

This study's central methodological goal was to follow the participants' reflections from a distance and over time on a range of complex topics open to different interpretations. In analyzing the diaries, specifically when focusing on the practice of recording events, the principal aspect that emerges in entirely remote research concerns the reflexivity created.

While conducting research fully remotely and working with healthcare professionals, some challenges arose. During the first few weeks, some critical issues emerged from the inability to meet with participants periodically. The lack of direct, in-person contact can decrease the participants' motivation. Keeping a diary is a habit that few people practice, and most of the subjects taking part in the study did

not follow such a routine before joining the study. The experience of reporting chronologically follows the researcher's needs rather than the participants' experience of time (Gershuny and Sullivan 1998).

Furthermore, diaries may cause concern and provoke some discomfort for participants because the act of recording and reflecting on events may cause emotional crises (Smyth 1998; Bernays et al. 2014). As researchers, we can take on a scholar-activist role (Markham and Pereira 2019) and practice a relational ethic of care (Ellis 2007; Gillies and Alldred 2012) based on feminist and intersectional values (Miller et al. 2012) geared toward "identifying and respecting diversity, paying attention to how our research may affect those under study, and articulating and acknowledging our intent as researchers and participants, including whether and how we aim to generate potentially transformative engagements" (Luka and Millette 2018:4). However, when reflexivity is elicited in participants, considering the type of critical relationship triggered between participant and researcher is crucial. Hanna (2018) described this as "distanced empathy," in which the usual strategies of offering participants a break or more physical or visceral demonstrations of empathy are not available. Therefore, it is important to reassure participants that they will be able to validate collected data at a later meeting and decide what the researcher can publish.

Finally, in long-distance research, several difficulties also arose for the researcher herself. A crucial part was framing my reflexivity while conducting the research. Through interviews and formalization of sociological categories, knowledge is constructed and situated, calling on the researcher to take responsibility for their positioning and on participants to reflect on the experience. In my case, much

personal information and many observations were amassed, considering that I was separated from my participants during the entire data collection process. Furthermore, I had to manage my personal feelings and emotions on many occasions when participants revealed personal details about their lives. While being physically distanced from the participants, the support that I continued to provide and the awareness that I could not act *in situ* impacted my analytical procedure. Therefore, in this study, my self-reflexivity became a form of "meta-analysis" (Markham 2020:229).

I proposed to frame the concept of *long-distance reflexivity* in both participants and the researcher.

The possibilities that audio offers make the recording process even more favorable for participants and help the researcher avoid missing voice nuances, laughter, and mood alterations involved in the recording. These aspects are even more central when the research is conducted entirely from a distance, with no opportunity to meet the participants in person. In actuality, long-distance data collection opens up unseen spaces of reflexivity (Rees, Crampton, and Monrouxe 2020) that deserve specific examination.

### **Participants' Long-Distance Reflexivity**

Regular diary entries for extended periods invite diarists to share detailed accounts of daily situations and ongoing processes, offering narratives on one's "internal" thoughts and feelings, as well as "external" situations, events, and the larger (changing) context (Meth 2003; Filep et al. 2018). With long-distance data collection, participants' reflexivity requires creation of dedicated times, spaces, and contexts (Mauthner and Doucet 2003). Keeping audio



diaries is one way to create such spaces, particularly in contexts in which opportunities for other forms of reflective practice are limited, such as confrontations with the researcher or other participants. The participant's relationship with the researcher is nonetheless present, albeit remotely. Neale (2021) described this as intensively walking alongside people to gain a processual understanding of how experiences and perceptions are created, negotiated, lived, and processed (Bartlett and Milligan 2015; Karadzhov 2020).

Following Latham's (2003) lead, I regarded the audio diary as a kind of performance of subjectivity and the follow-up interview as a re-performance or re-enactment of subjectivity. In the process of audio diary research, all participants' subjectivities and identities are continually (re)configured and (re)formed in ways that repeatedly (re)align and renew the ethical terrain. However, when participants' identities are in some respects myriad and shifting remotely, the role of "data producer and collector" is no longer marked strongly through physical meetings, creating what Watson, Lupton, and Michael (2021) described as "leaky boundaries."

For this reason, attention to participants' long-distance reflexivity must be considered not only in the data collection process, but also in the elaboration by which these data were generated, partly because participants' choices about how to represent their narratives also contribute to the meaning of the content they include. To situate participants' reflexivity in a remote relationship, I echo what Zimmerman and Wieder (1977) have proposed, stating the dual role that diarists play: naive performer and reflective informant. As performers, participants move through their regular activities as if the research were not present. However, the subjects also be-

come informants because they reflect on their performance and other completed activities.

By asking people to keep a chronologically organized diary or log of daily activities, we effectively have asked for a record of their activities and simultaneously for their interactions in their daily lives (Znaniecki 1934). In this sense, diaries function like field notes taken in ethnographic research. Therefore, participants can be viewed as "added ethnographers" for research purposes.

This diarist's self-reflexivity can be compared with that experienced by the researcher in the definition of research. Borrowing Markham's (2019) approach, subjects construct their meanings and actions in different environments and when stimulated to one's self-reflexivity. The main idea is for individuals to become "auto-ethnographers of their own lives" and "help people find modes and means of critically examining and understanding the contexts within which they are drawn into a neoliberal position through...seemingly innocuous practices" (Markham 2019:759). Applying an autoethnographic lens can lead to rediscovery of narrative as a means of conceiving and analyzing human experience, thereby encouraging researchers and participants to focus on "narratives of the self" (Denzin 1997). Self-reflexivity should help the diarist better understand how information is generated, how personal perspectives shift, and how interpretations are constructed over time.

Personal narratives have been recognized "as sense-making tools with the capacity to produce, challenge, and change the identities of individuals as well as collectives" (Andersen, Ravn, and Thomson 2020:367). This can be achieved by helping participants become qualitative researchers of their ex-



periences; identify how cultural identities, events, and formations are measured; and, most importantly, interrogate how their behaviors, activities, and personal relationships—in the form of information—can be collected and stored.

Considering diarists' self-reflexivity allows us to think deeply about the methods we use in research and the epistemological commitments that support them. As Finlay (2002:531) noted, "coming out through reflexive analysis is ultimately a political act. Done well, it has the potential to enliven, teach, and spur readers towards a more radical consciousness. Voicing the unspoken can empower both researcher and participant."

### Researcher Reflexivity

Recently, feminist researchers raised questions about emotion and reflexivity, that is, researchers' ability to "study" others' emotional experiences without simultaneously considering their own emotions' role along the way (Bondi 2005; Schurr and Abdo 2016).

On many occasions, I have found myself listening, coding, rereading, and analyzing intimate sharing, confidences related to relationships, difficult working interactions, domestic frustrations, fear, grief, and anxiety. In this sense, Scott (2022) offers insight into the impact the researcher's emotions may have by specifically focusing on longitudinal, diary-based methods. Following her findings, while conducting diary-based research, it is fundamental not to underestimate the emotional burden, ensure that meaningful debriefing is available, establish boundaries, and make space for emotion throughout fieldwork, as well as during analysis and writing.

Another crucial aspect of conducting research entirely remotely concerns the researcher's constant online presence. During the pandemic, some researchers lamented the shift in social science research to digital platforms, as they perceived deficits from the lack of embodied encounters that could serve as the basis for shared relationships (e.g., McCoyd et al. 2022). Furthermore, in some cases, the continued use of digital platforms to conduct research has resulted in a phenomenon termed "Zoom fatigue" (Shklarski, Abrams, and Bakst 2021; Aagaard 2022).

In recognition of such complexities and to mitigate any effects from long-distance data collection, it is fundamental that researchers employ several protective strategies to ensure that methods of data collection and analysis are appropriate and valid (Bornat and Bytheway 2012). Along these lines, researchers must treat their results responsibly and respectfully to ensure that they neither harm nor stigmatize participants or groups. This can be negotiated during final interviews by discussing the material that emerges from diarists and selecting together what may be appropriate to report.

### Conclusion

This article has explored the methodological challenges and opportunities involved in conducting long-distance data collection with healthcare professionals through the use of audio diaries. By combining audio diaries with follow-up interviews, the study has shown how this method can elicit rich, contextualized narratives that illuminate the social and emotional dimensions of healthcare work.

Theoretically, this study contributes to discussions on research reflexivity, narrative temporality, and emotional labor in healthcare. It expands current

understandings of qualitative research methods by demonstrating how audio diaries, as asynchronous and self-recorded tools, create a space for more spontaneous, situated, and affective storytelling—particularly when traditional face-to-face methods are not viable. While participants still shape their narratives with awareness of the research context, the distance and temporal flexibility foster new forms of reflexive engagement and emotional disclosure.

Methodologically, the research illustrates that audio diaries are a feasible and valuable strategy for collecting longitudinal and multi-layered data among healthcare providers, especially during crisis situ-

ations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the study also highlights important limitations, including the potential for participant fatigue and the emotional toll on researchers engaged in long-term remote fieldwork. These findings call for an expanded ethics of care in remote qualitative research, attentive to both participants and researchers.

In sum, this article contributes to the field of qualitative research by advancing a critical understanding of audio diaries as both a methodological and epistemological tool. It invites further reflection on how distance, time, and voice reshape the ways we produce and relate to knowledge in emotionally-charged professional contexts.

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